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Empathy to Empower Libraries: Embracing My Haitian Heritage & the Lakou Model for Social Justice & Equity

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Abstract
Empathy to Empower Libraries emphasizes the importance of understanding and embracing one's Haitian heritage in addressing systemic violence and oppression. The Haitian lakou (meaning courtyard in Kreyòl) model, a unique perspective on the fight against oppressive systems, can foster community and interdependence. Libraries can embody lakou principles, promoting empathy and understanding for others who have experienced similar oppression. By actively engaging in empathy, self-reflection, understanding boundaries, and promoting transparency and inclusion, libraries can work towards a more just and equitable world for all community members.

Keywords: *empathy, heritage, equity, social justice*

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“Without community, there is no liberation… But community must not mean a shedding of our differences nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.”

— Audre Lorde, in “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House”

As a Haitian American, I understand how oppressive forces impact one’s sense of home. Haiti has experienced imperialism and exploitation for centuries. As the first Black republic, Haiti has been a beacon of hope for many marginalized communities worldwide. Slavery, colonization, despotic leaders, and an invasion by US-led forces are all part of Haitian history. The Haitian people have a long history of resilience and resistance in the face of oppressive systems. However, this resilience has come at a cost. Haitians have been subjected to political and economic turmoil, natural disasters, pestilence, poverty, and decades of imperialist interventions and exploitation, leaving many without basic human rights. This exploitation has profoundly impacted the Haitian community, both within Haiti and in the diaspora.

A devastated National Palace of Haiti stands amidst the aftermath of the 2010 Earthquake, showcasing the destruction and resilience of the nation. A devastated National Palace of Haiti stands amidst the aftermath of the 2010 Earthquake, showcasing the destruction and resilience of the nation. Photo by Michelin Joseph.

Moreover, the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti exacerbated the country's already dysfunctional systems, creating a humanitarian crisis that left many people without a roof over their heads. Those who survived and rebuilt lost a sense of security and were left with instability and the loss of their homes. Learning about my cultural roots, Haiti's history, and the struggles that Haitians have faced over the years has helped me develop a deeper sense of empathy, compassion, and understanding for others who have experienced similar oppression and marginalization. I have always been closely tied to my cultural identity through the traditions, food, stories, and values of my Haitian heritage. Every aspect of my life was infused with the richness of my culture. Understanding the experiences of those who came before me has been crucial in shaping my understanding and expression of empathy and building community. My cultural perspectives on empathy and community play a significant role in shaping my approach to librarianship.

From Ancestral Roots to Modern Reality: The Importance of the Lakou System

A cherished photo from my first visit to Haiti in 2012, where I stand confidently against the backdrop of the magnificent mountains of Haiti. The name "Haiti," or Ayiti in Taino/Arawak language, signifies the "land of the high mountains," encapsulating the captivating and awe-inspiring natural splendor of the country. Photo by Michelin Joseph/Sasha Jean.

Growing up, hearing stories from my mother about the power of community and collaboration in a Haitian *lakou* (pronounced lah-coo), meaning courtyard in Kreyòl (Haitian-Creole), was a privilege. In my quest to understand the nuances of traditional Haitian culture, my mom revealed intriguing information about the country's history. She spoke about the existence of two distinct lakous - vodou and traditional. It is important to note that the Vodou lakou and traditional lakou models are not interchangeable but share a common goal of establishing communal spaces for work, life, and worship. Vodou, the syncretic religion that emerged from the African diaspora in Haiti, played a crucial role in shaping the lakou model (Dubois, 2012; Erickson & Walter, 2012).

However, for this writing piece, I am focusing solely on the traditional *lakou* that stood strongly against the plantation system and the state. This fact caught my attention, and I delved deeper to uncover more about this fascinating aspect of Haitian culture. The traditional lakou presents a unique perspective on how Haitians fought against the oppressive systems imposed upon them during slavery and after the Haitian Revolution. The *lakou* points to a shared living space, a cluster of homes, and land on a compound where extended family members, neighbors, and friends could co-exist in a quasi-egalitarian arrangement, also known as “an egalitatirian system without a state” (Dubois, 2012, p. 121; Erickson & Walter, 2012). The *lakou* was a form of resistance against the plantation system that had stripped enslaved Africans of their family ties and was a rejection of the dominant hierarchical structures of the plantation and political systems of Haiti.

Historian Laurent Dubois (2012) explains in his book *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* how *lakous* are known for their strong collaboration and interdependence, with community members coming together to support one another and share resources. These traditional and rural communities have been an important aspect of Haitian culture after the Haitian Revolution well into the 1800s until the 20th century (Dubois, 2012). By exploring this part of my culture, I came to appreciate the resilience and strength of the Haitians living in lakous. The lakou model emerged as a stark response to the oppressive plantation system and the dominating state structures in Haiti after independence

from France in 1804 (Dubois, 2012). In many ways, the lakou embodied the revolutionary spirit that rejected the Eurocentric norms and values previously imposed on the newly freed African-Haitian enslaved people.

A defining characteristic of the lakou model was its anti-plantation stance, which rejected the hierarchical power structures of colonial rule. Additionally, the lakou model was anti-state, reflecting a desire among Haitians to reject the centralized authority of the post-colonial government. The lakou, therefore, offered a semblance of a community-based support system, a semblance of home. The *lakou* model emphasizes the importance of mutual aid and collective action, recognizing that we are all interconnected and that our well-being is tied to those around us. Growing up, I learned that my identity is more than just about myself, but rather my connection to my community. The lakou has taught me the importance of working together, caring for each other, and preserving heritage. The stories I heard growing up of neighbors helping neighbors served me as a reminder, and an example, of the impact of empathy and mutual aid in promoting social cohesion and resilience.

Today, the physical boundaries of the lakou have become blurred as people leave for urban living opportunities. Haiti has undergone rapid urbanization, and in the 20th century, the traditional communal living spaces known as lakous lost their territorial hold. Families that once lived together within these vibrant compounds, sharing resources and collectively managing their land, have moved to urban centers of Haiti, like the capital of Port-au-Prince, in search of education and work opportunities. Also, as Haiti has struggled with economic and political instability in the 20th and 21st centuries, more and more people are leaving the country in search of better opportunities elsewhere.

Wherever we are, the lakou model of respect, reciprocity, and kinship are still essential components of Haitian culture, even as the structures that once housed them are transformed or displaced. As Haiti continues to evolve, we must recognize and celebrate the importance of these enduring principles. The idea of the *lakou* continues to be a powerful model for working together toward a more just and equitable society. The lakou has not only influenced my perspective on my

identity but has also given me the tools and knowledge to appreciate the diverse range of identities in this world.

Lakous as a Framework for Community-Focused Library Services and Resources

In many ways, the principles of the *lakou* are closely aligned with those of libraries, which also serve as hubs for community collaboration, education, and information sharing. Like *lakous*, libraries can play a crucial role in fostering community and interdependence by bringing people together to share resources, knowledge, and ideas. The lessons of the *lakou* can be applied in libraries through programs and initiatives that promote collaboration and community building. Hosting workshops or events that unite patrons to work on joint projects or goals or providing resources and support for community-led initiatives that address issues such as poverty, inequality, racism, and environmental degradation, are some ways that libraries can embody the principles of lakou.

The *lakou,* like the library, functions as a communal third place, distinct from home and work, that fosters a strong sense of community and belonging. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the "third place" concept refers to social environments where people can gather, socialize, and feel a sense of belonging outside their usual routines (Oldenburg, 1999). In addition to lakou yo (plural in Kreyòl: courtyards) and libraries, examples of contemporary third places include community centers, hair salons, barbers, parks, and cafes (Oldenburg, 1999). Third places are often seen as crucial for building a sense of community and fostering social connections, especially where opportunities for face-to-face interaction with others may be limited due to home entertainment and distance (Oldenburg, 1999).

Empathy: An Intervention to Systemic Violence and Oppression

My Haitian heritage has guided my understanding of empathy, a quality I carry over into my work as a librarian. Haitian values of respect, reciprocity, and kinship imbue a sense of tenderness and compassion that are crucial components of empathy. As library workers, we are responsible for acknowledging the unique experiences and perspectives each library user brings with them. We must

employ empathy while serving them to create a safe, welcoming space that respects differences, promotes tolerance, and fosters understanding. However, we are caught between the crosshairs of institutional policy, building relationships, and personal agency and are constantly maneuvering to interact with our patrons empathetically. Recognizing that empathy is not merely a warm and fuzzy feeling but an intervention against systemic violence and oppression, library workers bear the onus of creating safe, inclusive spaces for marginalized communities.

However, the negative impact of institutional policies, which often prioritize budgets and metrics over interpersonal relationships, can detract from the empathetic dynamic that library workers strive for. Despite these challenges, we must continue to push boundaries and assert our agency to create spaces where empathy is not just a fleeting notion but a fundamental pillar. The poet, feminist, and librarian Audre Lorde once said, "We have to consciously study how to be tender with each other until it becomes a habit" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.* Being "tender" with one another means being willing to listen and learn from different perspectives and experiences, even if doing so may be uncomfortable or challenging. Tenderness is a practice of empathy. Empathy can interrupt systemic violence and oppression within libraries and communities by contributing to solidarity and connection between people who may feel isolated or disconnected. It entails realizing that a complex web of social, economic, and political factors influences our unique experiences and that we must learn from each other and collaborate to eliminate oppressive systems within the lakou of our libraries, which will create a more compassionate and understanding world within our libraries, archives, and beyond by consciously practicing tenderness through empathy in our interactions with others.

The habit of tenderness is particularly relevant in the library worker's role in promoting empathy and inclusivity. Actively creating an environment where patrons feel safe, respected, and valued in the library and being mindful of our language, the resources we provide, and the policies we adopt to promote inclusivity and understanding all contribute to fostering a welcoming atmosphere. Cultivating

empathy and a willingness to listen to and learn from our patrons is important for addressing systemic violence and oppression within the library environment. Empathetic listening can allow us to see beyond our own biases and experiences to connect with others on a deeper level by listening to and understanding the experiences of our patrons and colleagues, which requires an ongoing commitment to education, introspection, and actively challenging and transforming oppressive structures and systems.

Additionally, systemic violence and oppression in libraries manifest through policies, practices, or cultural norms that perpetuate discrimination, exclusion, or marginalization of people. Such violence is also experienced as microaggressions, stereotyping, exclusion, or harassment, which profoundly impact the well-being and sense of belonging of those who experience it. Organizational policies play a crucial role in creating an empathetic environment for patrons. By promoting transparency and inclusion, libraries can incentivize workers to actively listen and engage in meaningful dialogue with patrons, from providing training materials to implementing systems that reward compassionate problem-solving. While empathy is a powerful tool for disrupting systemic violence and oppression, it alone cannot bring about direct action and create meaningful change.

Empathy requires effort from individual library workers themselves. Empathy is not passive; it requires active engagement and continuous self-reflection. We must recognize our unique roles as human beings interacting with people daily. Understanding boundaries, such as confidentiality rules, is also paramount. As human cogs in community spaces that serve as hubs for information, education, and engagement, library workers have a unique opportunity to promote empathy and, by extension, direct action informed by a deeper understanding of our neighbors and community members. As library workers, we can actively address systemic violence and oppression within their institutions by implementing policies and practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, developing collections that reflect diverse experiences and perspectives, offering programming that celebrates and elevates marginalized voices, and hiring from diverse backgrounds. We can use our

voices and resources to advocate for broader policy change related to social justice and equality, including hosting public forums or discussions around key issues or promoting civic engagement in our spaces. By applying empathy to inform direct action within the library context, we can work towards a more just and equitable world where every community member can thrive, and the library can truly become the third place.

Deep in the heart of libraries and archives lies a remarkable force that beats with quiet defiance, challenging the prevailing structure that houses it. The force is one of empathy and it is a sanctuary from the systemic violence and oppression that often pervades the outside world. It intervenes in the injustices of our society, offering an inclusive space for all to reflect and connect. Libraries like lakous are a refuge where people can seek shelter without fear of retribution and where community and intellectual freedom are cherished and safeguarded. As we navigate the stacks, let us remember this: With empathy, we can ultimately cultivate a stronger sense of belonging for our patrons, contributing to creating more empathetic and just libraries and archives.

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